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One of A Kind: Local Government in Outback Central West Queensland

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Abstract: The analysis of Australian local government reform almost invariably focuses on systemic changes that can be wrought by the application of various policy instruments, like the structural reform of the scale of local councils or changes to the enabling legislation governing local government. Scholars typically use this approach and differentiate the efficacy of reform measures according to classifications of council by generic type. While this approach has been exceedingly fruitful in the past, this paper argues that small, remote and isolated Australian local authorities are *sui generis* in the sense that they are not amenable to standard reform policies owing to their unique circumstances and special characteristics. The paper considers the case of eleven local shires in the Central West outback of Queensland that comprises the Remote Areas Planning and Development Board (RAPAD) group of councils and attempts to draw some general lessons for local government policymakers.

Keywords: Australian local government; outback councils; reform.

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Introduction

In common with their cousins in the physical sciences, social scientists typically study social systems in order to discern general patterns and extract general principles amenable to general application outside of the specific sample under consideration. In general, this approach has been most fruitful bearing in mind the complexities involved in human behaviour and the manifold difficulties this presents to the scholar of human institutions. However, this approach has its limitations and these are especially acute when the phenomena under investigation are not representative of their class.

These general reflections have implications for almost all avenues of social inquiry, including the policy analysis of local government. For example, the study of comparative local government has typically failed to achieve satisfactory outcomes for the simple reason that the heterogeneity of local government between different countries, and even between different municipal jurisdictions within a given nation, is so great that it is difficult, if not impossible, to provide a meaningful comparative assessment of the jurisdictions under consideration and draw plausible generic lessons. This problem is well recognized by experts in international comparative local government and various scholars have tackled the problem in different ways. For example, in the recent past, Coulson's (1995) *Local Government in Eastern Europe*, John's (2001) *Local Governance in Western Europe*, Denters and Rose's (2005) *Comparing Local Governance: Trends and Developments* and Anwar Shah's (2006) *Local Governance in Industrial Countries* have all grappled with the problem with varying degrees of success.

An analogous, but much less well recognized problem also exists in the analysis of local government within a given nation. Even scholars with a highly developed conceptual framework, such as Garcea and LeSage's (2005) *Municipal Reforms in Canada*, have struggled to overcome significant institutional variation between local government jurisdictions in the same

country. This problem is compounded when less precise analytical procedures are applied to 'oranges and apples' jurisdictional differences.

The same problem can also be found in a given state or uniform national local government jurisdiction, but this has unfortunately passed almost unnoticed in the literature on local government. It is universally assumed that if local councils fall within the same jurisdiction, they are subject to broadly the same economic, legislative and political processes, and they have a common institutional structure, then they can be assessed using the same tools of analysis. This presumption is usually tempered by the decomposition of local councils in a given local government jurisdiction into discrete categories or typologies. Proposed policy measures are then differentiated according to their impact on the different classes of local government within the jurisdiction.

This approach is often fruitful when its assumptions approximate the real-world structure of a given local government jurisdiction. Thus, in homogeneous local government systems, such as those generally found in some spatially compact and uniformly populated countries, like Japan, Denmark and many other small European nations, few difficulties are encountered. However, in local government jurisdictions characterized by extreme diversity in economic structure, local population size, demographic density, and geographical size, it is hardly surprising that the approach sometimes fails.

Australian local government is marked by extreme diversity in precisely these characteristics (Worthington and Dollery 2001). In this paper we consider the case of eleven sparsely populated and spatially vast local shires in the Central West outback of Queensland that comprises the Remote Areas Planning and Development Board (RAPAD) group of councils. Under the Queensland local government reform process and the objectives of the Queensland Reform Commission, the RAPAD councils are confronted with forced amalgamation. It is argued that this group of local councils has such peculiar characteristics that the usual policy measures designed to improve local government

effectiveness have no prospects of success. Put differently, the application of standard remedies to enhance operational effectiveness and financial sustainability are likely to be counter-productive and damage the very organizations they are intended to assist. The RAPAD group of local shires thus constitutes a 'special case' outside of conventional policy prescription.

The paper itself is divided into six main areas. Section 2 considers two broad approaches to local government reform in Australia; process change and structural change. Section 3 briefly summarises the Queensland local government reform process in order to locate the RAPAD group of councils within the broader policy debate. Section 4 discusses the unique characteristics of these councils. Section 5 examines the unconventional role played by RAPAD councils in the Central West area of Queensland. Section 6 describes the role of the RAPAD organisation in facilitating shared services and resource sharing between member councils. The paper ends with some brief concluding remarks on the scope for reform among RAPAD councils.

Process Change and Structural Change in Local Government

Structural reform has traditionally been the main 'one-size-fits-all' policy response by Australian state and territory governments to tackle real and perceived problems in local government (Vince 1997). While other policy initiatives have also been attempted, perhaps most notably the redesign of the various state Local Government Acts over the past twenty years, structural reform has centred on compulsory council amalgamations. The Queensland Local Government Reform process and the objectives of the Queensland Reform Commission thus fall squarely within this tradition.

However, if we consider the conceptual and empirical literature on local government amalgamation, as well as observed outcomes of structural reform programs in the various Australian local government jurisdictions, the historical consensus surrounding amalgamation in Australia is puzzling (see, for instance, Dollery *et al.* 2006a). The academic literature is decidedly

sceptical on the efficacy of council consolidation and the empirical evidence is at best mixed. For example, in his *Merger Mania*, Andrew Sancton (2000, 83) concluded that 'the efficient delivery of municipal services does not require large municipalities'. In much the same vein, Percy Allan (2003, 80) has argued that in Australia 'at the administrative level the efficiency and effectiveness of a local council is not a function of size' and 'all the empirical evidence suggests that big is not better when it comes to local government'. Similar sentiments have been expressed by Allan (2001), Bish (2000), Boyne (1998), Dollery (1997), Dollery (2003), Dollery and Crase (2004), Jones (1989), Katsuyama (2003), May (2003), Oakerson (1999), and Witherby *et al.* (1999), amongst many others.

This literature is thus deeply dubious of structural reform as a panacea for local government in general and Australian local government in particular. These doubts are compounded when we consider local councils outside large Australian capital cities, and further intensified in the case of remote small local councils situated at vast distances from both each other and major population centres (see, for instance, Dollery *et al.* 2007a), such as the RAPAD group of councils. If council amalgamation is indeed flawed as a method of enhancing the efficiency and financial sustainability of local government in the remote Australian outback, as this literature suggests, then how should local government policy makers tackle the problem? One way of approaching the problem is to distinguish between structural change and process change as methods of improving the operational efficiency and financial sustainability of municipal entities. *Structural change* involves the reorganization of the number, size and type of local council whereas *process change* refers to changes in the methods employed by municipalities.

Although it is often very difficult to measure the long-term consequences of either structural change or process change in complex organizations, like local councils, which provide a wide range of services in a milieu that inevitably trades-off economic efficiency against various aspects of representative democracy, there can be little doubt that the costs involved in structural

change are typically far greater than those associated with process change. The costs involved in structural change normally include 'the direct financial costs of reorganization (including the costs of consultants' reports, departmental submissions, redundancy pay, redeployment and retraining, etc.), the costs of disruption to the ongoing business of government, and the social and psychological costs (including the stresses and strains caused by extra work pressures, job insecurity, the loss of morale, redundancy, etc.)' (Boston *et al.* 1996, 88).

In small remote outback councils, additional costs attached to amalgamation involve powerful negative economic and social multipliers that are set in motion and which can inexorably reduce the economic and social viability of small communities to the point where they no longer exist at all. Unlike their larger counterparts in metropolitan and regional urban centres, small local councils in outback communities provide numerous services outside the normal range of council activities, such council shops, banking services, age care services, medical services, etc., for the simple reason that these services would not otherwise be available.

In the context of outback Australian local government, almost invariably afflicted by the 'tyranny of distance', the planning and management of structural change also impose significant travel costs. Moreover, division and bitterness between residents of different outback communities that frequently accompanies the amalgamation, typically involving the migration of municipal employees from small outlying towns to regional centres, cannot be stressed too much. Accordingly, Boston *et al.* (1996) contend that 'given that any major reorganization is likely to prove disruptive and costly, that certain teething problems are inevitable, and that a new organization might take a year or more to become fully effective, it is always worth asking whether a proposed structural adjustment is really necessary or whether a change in policy or personnel might not be a better, cheaper, or simpler solution to the identified problem'.

This suggests that confronted by a choice between structural solutions or process solutions to a particular problem, such as enhancing the operational efficiency of municipal service delivery, where the eventual outcome is not only difficult to determine *ex ante* but also problematical to measure *ex post*, policy makers should avoid structural change unless there are compelling reasons to the contrary. Moreover, structural change is almost impossible to reverse whereas process change found to be defective is comparatively easy and cheap to undo.

Queensland Local Government Reform

In 2004, the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) resolved to consider the financial and other pressures confronting councils in Queensland and to examine the various options for local government reform to ensure the long-run viability of local authorities. As a first step, a *Discussion Paper* entitled *Size, Shape and Sustainability of Queensland Local Government* was released on 3 March 2005 and a Special Conference of the LGAQ held in Brisbane in early June 2005, which formulated a *Communiqué* approving a 'comprehensive reform blueprint' (LGAQ 2005). A 'ten point *Action Plan*' followed from the *Communiqué* that was subsequently endorsed by both the LGAQ Executive and the Queensland Minister for Local Government and Planning. The *Action Plan* provided for a local government reform program embodying the *Size, Shape and Sustainability (SSS) Review Framework*, sustainability indicators, 'options for change', 'Independent Review Facilitators', and funding arrangements for state government support of \$25 million. The reform program itself was outlined in the *Size, Shape and Sustainability: Guidelines Kit* (LGAQ 2006).

The SSS review process outlined four main 'options for change': 'Resource sharing through service agreements'; 'resource sharing through joint enterprise'; 'significant boundary change'; and 'merger/amalgamation of adjoining councils'. It is significant that none of these options included the possibility of 'business as usual'. By the latter half 2006, the SSS process was

well under way and a number of councils across Queensland had engaged 'Independent Review Facilitators', undergone financial assessment by the Queensland Treasury Corporation and were in the process of conducting the SSS review for their respective areas.

This process was still underway when the Queensland government made the shock announcement on 17 April 2007 that it had abandoned its collaboration with the LGAQ SSS process and decided instead to embark on a radical program of compulsory amalgamation. Under its new Local Government Reform Program, the Queensland state government appointed a seven-member Reform Commission to recommend local council amalgamations by August 2007 for the election of new councils on 15 March 2008. Submissions by councils and other affected individuals and organizations to the Reform Commission had to be lodged by 25 May 2007, thereby effectively curtailing consultation and severely limiting opportunities to make considered submissions to the Reform Commission. The Terms of Reference (TOR) for the deliberations and recommendations of the Queensland Reform Commission were published under section 159U of the legislation on 19 April 2007: Section 159U strongly directed the Reform Commission to forcibly amalgamate small councils.

The rationale for the abrupt policy reversal by the Queensland state government was set out in a document entitled *Local Government Reform: A New Chapter for Local Government in Queensland* (Department of Local Government, Planning, Sport and Recreation (DLGPS&R) 2007). Apart from submissions by individual councils and groups of councils, the official response of organized local government to the policy 'U-turn' took the form of a LGAQ (2007) paper *Submission to Local Government Reform Commission* (Dollery *et al.* 2007b).

Characteristics of RAPAD Councils

The Remote Areas Planning and Development Board (RAPAD) consists of a group of councils comprising eleven shires in the Central Western region of Queensland. Member councils comprise Aramac Shire, Barcaldine Shire, Barcoo Shire, Blackall Shire, Boulia Shire, Diamantina Shire, Ilfracombe Shire, Isisford Shire, Longreach Shire, Tambo Shire and Winton Shire.

The region is generally characterised by vast areas with an extremely low population density. The total area of the RAPAD Councils is 347,766 square kilometres, which is nearly one and a half size of the territory of the United Kingdom (Central Intelligence Agency 2007). The 'big four' shires, including Barcoo Shire, Boulia Shire, Diamantina Shire and Winton Shire, occupy 78 per cent of the territory. Figure 1 illustrates the spatial dimensions of the RAPAD group.

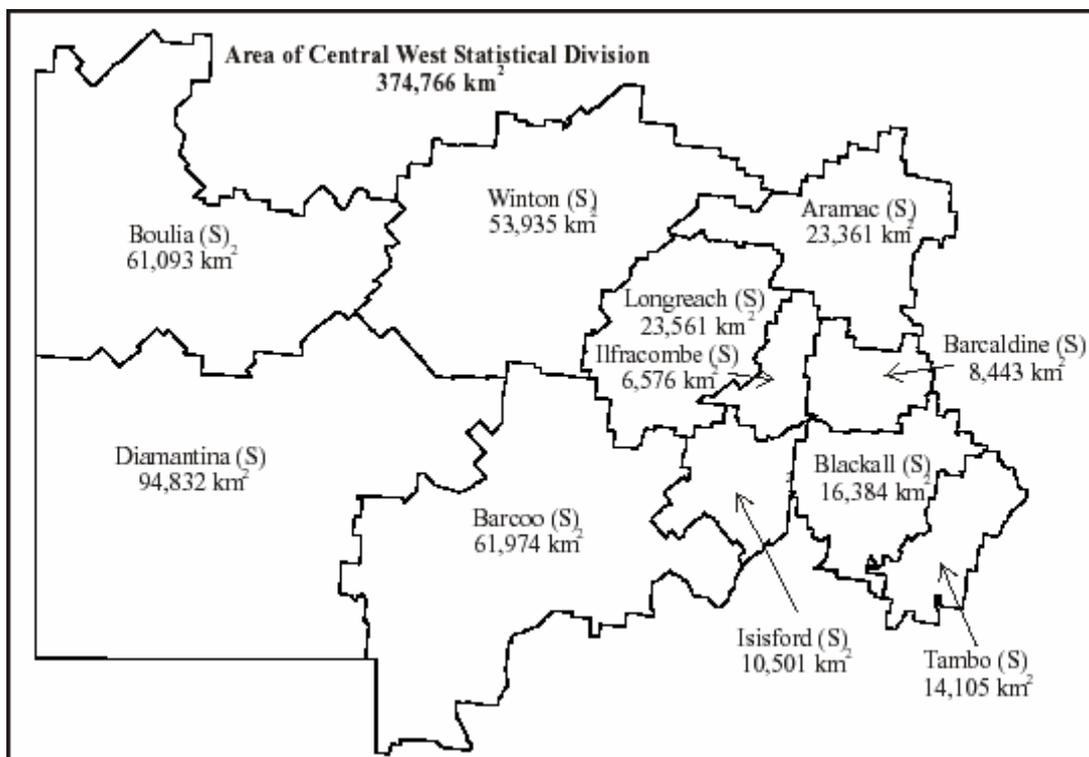


Figure 1: RAPAD Shire Councils

Source: Ilfracombe Shire Council (2007, 4).

Whereas the RAPAD Councils occupy a huge geographical area, total population size is extremely small: The total population size for all member councils combined is just over 12,000 people, of which nearly one third abides within the Longreach Shire Council boundaries. Moreover, seven councils have a population less than eight hundred people each. As a result, the population density of the region is extraordinarily small at 0.032 people per square kilometre, which is approximately equal to one person per 31 square kilometres. The lowest population density occurs in the Diamantina Council with one person per 330 square kilometres (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007a).

A third distinctive characteristic of the region is the remoteness of the member councils from Brisbane (the Queensland state capital and largest population conurbation). All shire centres are located more than 850km from Brisbane as the crow flies. Indeed, all but one regional centre (Tambo) is further from Brisbane than Sydney (state capital of neighbouring New South Wales). The most remote RAPAD regional centre from Brisbane is Boulia, some 1722km distant. Put in national context, this exceeds the distance between Brisbane and Melbourne (the state capital of Victoria) (RACQ 2007).

In addition, the distances involved are vast, not only between RAPAD regional centres and Brisbane, but also between local shire towns themselves. For example, the distance between Bedourie (Diamantina Shire) and Longreach city is 730km, which is approximately equal to the distance between Melbourne and Adelaide (the state capital of South Australia). Moreover, all but one shire centre (Ilfracombe) lies more than 100km from Longreach. These immense distances represent significant impediments to all forms of cooperation between RAPAD councils, especially council amalgamation of all shires into a single giant council. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how a centralized amalgamated council could effectively and efficiently manage the vast area without incurring prohibitive costs.

The socioeconomic characteristics of the RAPAD group of councils are also remarkable. For instance, the total labour force of the RAPAD area comprises only 8,346 workers, with the biggest industry being agriculture, particularly cattle ranching (Dollery and Johnson 2007). Unemployment rates are very low, with an average of only 1.6 per cent in the RAPAD statistical region, with rates recorded in Ilfracombe and Barcoo of just 0.4 and 0.5 per cent respectively. The unemployment highest rate of 4.4 per cent occurs in Boulia, which is still less than average unemployment rate for Australia as a whole. By contrast, average taxable income ranges from \$27,730 in Aramac to \$40,899 in Diamantina; generally below (except Diamantina) the Australian average level of \$40,829 in 2003(Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007m).

In spite of general perception that remote areas in the Australian outback are typically populated by older people with relatively low proportion of youth, the age distribution in RAPAD Council is similar to the Australia-wide age distribution. Individuals under 14 range from 15.3 per cent (in Diamantina) to 27.4 per cent (in Ilfracombe) compared with 20.8 per cent Australian average. Persons aged 55 and over make up 15.1 per cent (in Ilfracombe) to 28 per cent (in Winton) of the population, which does not deviate significantly from the national average of 22 per cent (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007a).

Table 1 summarises the general characteristics of RAPAD area councils.

Table 1: General characteristics of RAPAD councils

Indicator/ Council	Aramac	Barcaldine	Barcoo	Blackall	Boulia	Diamantina	Ilfracombe	Isisford	Longreach	Tambo	Winton	Total
Population	705	1,708	455	1,607	550	306	363	301	3,986	657	1,536	12,174
% of RAPAD Councils	6%	14%	4%	13%	5%	3%	3%	2%	33%	5%	13%	100%
Population density (people per sq. km)	0.030	0.202	0.007	0.098	0.009	0.003	0.055	0.029	0.169	0.047	0.028	0.032
Area (square km)	23,361	8,443	61,974	16,384	61,093	94,832	6,576	10,501	23,561	14,105	53,935	374,766
% of RAPAD Councils	6%	2%	17%	4%	16%	25%	2%	3%	6%	4%	14%	100%
Distance from regional centre to Brisbane	1139	1073	1270	965	1722	1602	1152	1089	1179	864	1359	
Distance from regional centre to Longreach	126	107	217	215	543	730	27	117	0	316	179	
Labour force	513	1,047	376	1,095	435	229	230	212	2,633	452	1,124	8,346
Unemployment (smoothed) %	1.4	1.8	0.5	1.4	4.4	2.2	0.4	1.9	1.8	0.7	1.3	1.6
Av. taxable income \$ (2003)	27,730	34,354	33,230	33,217	40,449	40,899	29,170	29,785	34,435	32,411	33,842	
Age groups %:												Australia
0-14 years	22.4%	23.7%	16.1%	23.1%	19.5%	15.3%	27.4%	20.2%	21.2%	19.6%	20.2%	20.8%
15-54 years	53.1%	50.4%	64.6%	53.0%	62.4%	62.0%	57.5%	59.3%	54.5%	56.8%	51.8%	57.1%
55 years and over	24.6%	25.9%	19.3%	23.8%	18.1%	22.7%	15.1%	20.5%	24.3%	23.5%	28.0%	22.0%

Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007a, 2007b, 2007c, 2007d, 2007e, 2007f, 2007g, 2007h, 2007i, 2007j, 2007k, 2007l); Dollery and Johnson (2007); Boulia Shire Council (2007); Diamantina Shire Council (2007); Ilfracombe (2007); Isisford Shire Council (2007); RACQ (2007); Tambo Shire Council (2007); and Winton Shire Council (2007).

Unconventional Role of RAPAD Councils

Despite expanding their role over the past two decades, compared with other local government systems in comparable advanced industrial democracies, Australian local councils still typically provide only a limited range of local public goods and services (Dollery *et al.* 2006b). Although the 'services to people' component of service provision has increased over time, the emphasis remains overwhelming on 'services to property' involving local amenities, local economic development, local infrastructure, local planning and local property services.

Due to the peculiar characteristics of the RAPAD councils, its member councils play much greater role in their respective communities than the vast majority of Australian local authorities. This is especially evident in three main avenues of activity. Firstly, they occupy a dominant economic position in their

respective communities. For instance, in most RAPAD councils, the municipality is the single most important employer of the local workers (Dollery and Johnson 2007). Moreover, council expenditure usually represents the greatest single injection of funds into the local economy. Many local businesses are thus critically dependent on local council outlays for their very survival.

Secondly, the impact of council employees on local organizations is crucial to what may be termed long-run 'community sustainability'. The number of council staff and their families involved in community and sporting organizations, the number of employees' children attending local schools, these children as a proportion of the minimum threshold required for the survival of local schools and the number of kids in the local school, and so forth, all indicate the decisive indirect impact of local councils on the well being of their local communities (Dollery and Johnson 2007).

Thirdly, RAPAD local councils intervene widely in the local economy to overcome 'market failure' by delivering goods and services invariably provided by the private sector and public agencies in normal Australian local government jurisdictions. In general, the demographic and spatial dimensions of the RAPAD area mean that many private and public services enjoyed by the vast majority of Australians are simply not commercially viable. Local councils are thus obliged to provide as many of these services as possible (Dollery and Johnson 2007).

Some idea of the remarkable role played by local councils in the RAPAD region can be gathered from a brief synoptic description of the activities of individual councils, an exercise that illustrates that the tripartite division of extraordinary council functions sketched above is blurred in practice. In the absence of any other feasible service providers, local authorities simply must provide a large range of essential services. For instance, not many councils in Australia provide the postal services (as in Barcoo and Ilfracombe); a café (as in Boulia, Isisford and Winton); undertaker services (Barcoo, Blackall,

Boulia, Ilfracombe and Tambo); real-estate agency activities (Diamantina); operate general stores (Ilfracombe and Isisford); provide freight services (Isisford); offer banking facilities (Blackall, Boulia, Tambo and Winton); or operate the local newspaper (Blackall). These councils also assist other levels of government by providing services on their behalf, including community and low-income housing (Blackall and Boulia, Diamantina, Ilfracombe and Winton); health services (Barcaldine, Barcoo, Blackall, Diamantina, Isisford and Tambo); Centerlink (Blackall and Winton); as well as provide assistance to the Queensland Education Department (Barcoo and Isisford) (Dollery and Johnson 2007).

At the level of the individual local council, Aramac Shire provides a range of non-traditional services, such as a bakery, Home and Community Care programs and a rural transactions centre. Similarly, Barcaldine Shire delivers a number of state government programs, including rural family support, 60 & Better, Home Assist Secure and a HACC program. The Barcoo Shire Council provides the Jundah Post Office, a bus service, a 4WD vehicle for the transportation of school children, land for the Windorah Medical Clinic, land for state community housing; undertaker services and burial services, a building for the playgroup in Jundah, a bursary system for Shire residents undertaking tertiary, diploma or trade qualifications and training opportunities for three trainees and two apprentices in the Shire (Dollery and Johnson 2007).

Blackall Shire provides a Westpac Bank facility and acts as a 'developer' by supplying industrial estate as well as residential land for sale. The Blackall Council runs an extensive local economic development program; it coordinates a television advertising program; and undertakes festival coordination. Other non-traditional services include a stock route maintenance; wild dog eradication programs; weed eradication programs; rental of pensioner units; the 60 & Better program; family day care; rural in-home family care; community services coordination; disability services; community housing; saleyards and selling facilities; undertaking services; an airport; SBS radio retransmission; youth development services; the local newspaper; the

Multipurpose Sport and Recreation Association (with 18 local clubs); and community celebrations for Australia Day, ANZAC Day, and Clean Up Australia Day (Dollery and Johnson 2007).

The Boulia Shire Council operates the local credit union; the butcher shop is leased out by Council; the café/kiosk is owned, staffed and operated by Council; the coffee shop is leased out by Council; funeral services are staffed and operated by Council; and the Council leases out housing to employees, contractors and pensioners (Boulia Shire Council 2007).

Diamantina Shire Council provides many services outside traditional local council functions, with the most significant being the provision of a health care service as well as maintaining the local airstrip. In addition, the Council performs the role of undertaker; real estate agent by developing land, supplying housing and managing housing stock for the Queensland Department of Housing. The Council has also moved homes into local towns (Birdsville and Bedourie) for local housing (Diamantina Shire Council 2007).

The Ilfracombe Shire operates the local Post Office and a rural transaction centre. It is involved in the operations of the railway; the general store; the tourism centre; the day-care centre; and the sporting and recreational centre. It provides rental housing to residents and acts as the local undertaker (Ilfracombe Shire Council 2007).

The Isisford Shire Council provided the local general store and assisted with purchase of initial stock. The Shire is responsible for the EFTPOS facility; it leased the local store *gratis*; and the store owner's partner is employed by Council to assist the couple financially. In addition, the Council established the Outer Barcoo Interpretation Centre/Café; set up a rural transaction centre at the local Post Office; contributed to a weekly freight service from Longreach to Yaraka return; assisted in securing the community bus; and Council employees drive the town ambulance. Moreover, the Isisford Council provides assistance to many community organizations, including the local primary

school's P & C meetings, shows, gymkhanas, the Golf Club, sporting groups, etc. (Isisford Shire Council 2007).

The Tambo Shire Council provides functions for public agencies, including the Multi-Purpose Centre; the Home and Community Care Program; the community aged-care program; and accommodation for the aged. The Council provides the facilities at the Tambo Education Centre, manages the Tambo child care centre; supplies a youth worker to support the local youth activities; offers administrative support to local sporting clubs; and provides a bus service for the aged, youth and sporting clubs (Tambo Shire Council 2007).

The Winton Shire assists other government agencies by providing services on their behalf including Centrelink; the provision of a youth worker; child-care facilities; HACC services, including veterans affairs, aged-care, domiciliary nurse and Meals on Wheels; the Diamantina Gardens aged-care facility; Pelican aged-care units; rural family support and the 60's & Better program. The Council also operates the Waltzing Matilda Centre which includes a restaurant, bank, Visitor Information Centre and an art gallery. In addition, it provides undertaking services; a gym; a distributor for Avgas; as well as providing housing for youth, the disadvantaged and some staff (Winton Shire Council 2007).

Table 2 provides a synoptic description of the extraordinary range of functions provided by RAPAD councils.

Table 2: Extraordinary Functions of RAPAD Councils

Council /Unusual functions	Aramac	Barcaldine	Barcoo	Blackall	Boulia	Diamantina	Ilfracombe	Isisford	Longreach	Tambo	Winton
Banking	Yes			Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes			
Health support		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes		Yes	Yes
Queensland Government Agency	Yes					Yes					Yes
Centrelink Agency	Yes			Yes							Yes
Funeral and Undertaking	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			Yes	Yes
Television rebroadcasting/ maintenance	Yes				Yes						
Housing	Yes			Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			Yes	Yes
Café					Yes			Yes			Yes
Postal services			Yes			Yes					
General store/kiosk					Yes		Yes	Yes			
Other services	Bakery; Bowling Club; TAB licenses			Newspaper	Butcher shop	Air strip maintenance; House relocation; Child care; Emergency services		Freight services		Recreation facilities; Emergency services; Library; Bus for community clubs	Airport and air strip maintenance and development

Source: Dollery and Johnson (2007); Boulia Shire Council (2007); Diamantina Shire Council (2007); Ilfracombe (2007); Isisford Shire Council (2007); Tambo Shire Council (2007); and Winton Shire Council (2007).

RAPAD Organisation

The Remote Area Planning and Development Board (RAPAD) is a not-for-profit, listed and incorporated organisation of the Central West Queensland shire councils with a Board of Directors representing its member shire councils. RAPAD is also a Regional Organisation of Councils (ROC) and thus has an operating protocol with the LGAQ. RAPAD Board members of the Central West ROC have resolved to confer all roles and responsibilities of their ROC upon RAPAD. RAPAD also has a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the South West Regional Economic Development Association (SWRED) and Desert Channels Queensland (DCQ) - the peak natural resource management groups for the Lake Eyre Basin in Queensland. Several RAPAD Directors hold executive positions with the West Queensland Local Government Association (WQLGA) and the LGAQ (Dollery and Johnson 2007).

The RAPAD mission is 'to plan, facilitate and encourage sustainable growth for the future of outback Queensland'. 'Core focus areas' identified under the

RAPAD strategic plan are transport, regional planning, capacity building, natural resource management, local services, technology and communication, 'sustainable' industries and investment attraction and business opportunities. RAPAD undertakes a number projects at the regional level as well as lobbying on behalf of the region in these core focus areas. Significant achievements to date include:

- Health and Human Services Blueprint - The Blueprint maps health and human services across the region and recommends strategies to improve current services, and plan for future service delivery;
- Regional Marketing Plan – This Plan aims to engage Central West Queensland communities, businesses and government agencies in the deployment of a 'regional marketing plan' to attract investment and professional/skilled labour to the region;
- Rural financial counselling – This provides a service to Central West Queensland families and businesses requiring assistance in financial planning and management;
- Migration – RAPAD is registered as a 'regional certifying body' to assist migrants with relocation;
- Water infrastructure – This involves assessing and facilitating regional needs under the federal government water fund;
- Community Reference Panel Member – This includes the 'Blueprint for the Bush', the LGAQ and state government housing study and Desert Channels Queensland;
- RAPAD SkillsConnect Project - This aims to identify skilled labour shortages in Central Western Queensland and then use this information to attract skilled workers to the region;
- 'Broadband in the Bush' – This project is designed to increase the reach and penetration of broadband infrastructure and services within the region;
- Regional brand - A regional brand is being developed that will promote Central West Queensland as a place to live, work and invest; and

- Lobbying and policy development – This includes securing geothermal power legislation, health funding, country horse racing assistance and subsidised air routes.

In addition, RAPAD has prepared numerous submissions on various issues that affect their constituents. The flavour of these efforts is best illustrated by means of examples of recent submissions: RAPAD Response: Developing a Consumer Health Council for Queensland; RAPAD Submission to the Department of Natural Resources, Mines and Water Resource Operations Plan; RAPAD Submission to Discussion Paper on Broadband Connect/Clever Networks; and RAPAD Submission to Blueprint for the Bush Discussion Paper.

These projects, submissions, lobbying and other activities demonstrate a high level of cooperation and interaction between the eleven RAPAD councils through the RAPAD organisation. This established platform of cooperation raises the question as to whether this existing level of co-operation could be expanded and for RAPAD to undertake an even greater proactive role in coordinating services in either a cooperative or shared manner in order to improve efficiency by achieving an increased scale of operations where feasible, without the severe consequences of forced amalgamation.

There are many options available to increase the resource sharing efforts of RAPAD. RAPAD has established a good working relationship between participating members who appear to be receptive to new cooperative initiatives to improve service delivery to their respective communities. Obvious possibilities include Financial Management; Plant and Fleet Management; Information Systems; Human Resources; Regulatory and Planning; Works Support; Revenue Management; Supply and Procurement; Records; Treasury; Land Information and GIS; and Internal Audit and Risk Management.

The only limitations on the future resource sharing by RAPAD members are (a) the preferences of members on how much autonomy they are prepared to sacrifice to achieve feasible cost savings; and (b) whether proposed resource sharing initiatives show promise of worthwhile cost savings. These matters are best decided on a voluntary basis by members.

Scope for Reform

The extraordinary range and scope of the activities undertaken by the RAPAD group of councils have several key features. In the first place, local government is far more important in outback Queensland than usual in Australia in terms of the economic and social sustainability of the small populations it serves. Indeed, without the presence of a local council, most regional towns would simply wither away. Secondly, the nature of many of these activities is heavily dependent on intimate local knowledge of local needs; information that would be unavailable to a restructured and amalgamated RAPAD with a single administrative centre. The idiosyncratic character of 'extra-curricula' service provision thus makes local decision making on local resource allocation indispensable. Thirdly, it is evident that RAPAD councils deliver numerous essential services normally provided by public agencies and private firms. The absence of these councils would therefore place a greater burden on Commonwealth and state governments. Fourthly, the vast spatial area served by RAPAD and its extremely low population density means that scale economies in standard local government service provision are unobtainable regardless of the structural ordering of local government. By contrast, 'back-office' functions, like Financial Management and Information Systems, are not dominated by the 'tyranny of distance' and are thus amenable to resource sharing and shared service model provision by an organization such as the RAPAD ROC. Finally, the importance of local leadership in local economic development cannot be exaggerated. It follows that any diminution of local elected representation would prove disastrous.

These characteristics necessarily imply that the scope for ‘top-down’ reform by the Queensland government is severely restricted. The unique and distinctive nature of RAPAD local government activity, as well as its inherent fragility derived from local knowledge and local voluntary cooperation that can easily be destroyed by ‘heavy-handed’ and coercive state government policy measures, suggest that standard policy instruments cannot work. In particular, structural reform through forced amalgamation is almost certainly doomed to failure since the economies of scale on which its hope of success hinges are unattainable, given the distances and population densities involved. Moreover, other ‘top-down’ policy interventions, such as the compulsory transfer of local functions to a legislatively strengthened RAPAD organization capable of ‘independent’ service provision, would surely damage the vulnerable voluntary cooperation between local citizen and local council on which the success of Central West councils depends.

Special cases require special treatment. As we have sought to demonstrate in this paper, the RAPAD group of councils is without doubt a ‘special case’ not amenable to standard policy prescription of the kind that has come to characterize Australian local government. Any effort aimed at improving the operational efficiency of its member councils will have to bear this caveat in mind. Cooperative collaborative policy development founded on the voluntary participation of RAPAD councils thus seems to be the only sensible way forward. This approach should centre on process change by strengthening the ‘back-office’ capability of the RAPAD organization as we have argued.

This claim can be generalized to other constellations of local councils in the vast Australian outback with similar characteristics. Indeed, much the same argument can also be advanced in some other countries, such as parts of remote Canada and the United States, with comparable types of local government possessing the same basic features. In all these situations standard policy prescriptions based on ‘stylized’ versions of metropolitan (or at least regional) municipalities with manageable geographic areas and relatively

high population densities simply cannot be translated into remote and unpopulated local government jurisdictions.

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